

CHEAP REPOSITORY.

SUNDAY READING.

THE

CONVERSION

OF

[St. PAUL the APOSTLE.



Sold by J. MARSHALL,

(PRINTER to the CHEAP REPOSITORY for Religious and Moral Tracts) No. 17, Queen-Street, Cheap-side, and No. 4, Aldermary Church-Yard; and R. WHITE, Piccadilly, LONDON.

By S. HAZARD, at Bath; and by all Booksellers, Newsmen, and Hawkers, in Town and Country.

Great Allowance will be made to Shopkeepers and Hawkers.

PRICE ONE PENNY.

Or 4s. 6d. per 100.—5s. for 2s. 6d.—1s. 6d. for 25.

[Entered at Stationers Hall.]

CONVERSION of St. PAUL, &c.

PAUL was one of the chief Apostles. The greater part of the Epistles of the New Testament were written by him, and it is therefore well worth the while of every Christian, to bestow some pains in considering both his character and his wonderful history.

In order properly to introduce the present subject of Paul's Conversion, it is necessary first to say something of the ancient Prophecies concerning Christ, by which means we shall shew the good reason which Paul had for believing in him at the time when he appeared.

The Old Testament Prophecies of our Savior are many, for his appearance on earth was an event of vast importance, and it is no wonder, therefore, that early notice of it was given in the sacred writings. In the beginning of the world, when our first parents had sinned, the sentence of death immediately passed upon them; but no sooner was this curse pronounced, than the merciful promise was also given, that "*the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head;*" a promise which related to Christ, though as yet dark and mysterious, and which was intended to excite, even from the first, man's humble faith and trust. As the age of the world advanced, the promise grew brighter and brighter. It was said to Abraham, "*In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed;*" and soon afterwards it was added, "*In ISAAC shall thy seed be blessed.*" From time to time the promise was renewed, "*there was to be a root*

of Jesse that was to reign over the Gentiles, and in him should the Gentiles trust;" and again, it was still more distinctly said, "*Behold a Virgin shall conceive, and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Emanuel,*" (or God with us.) And again, "*For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*" In the 53d of Isaiah, all the particulars of his coming are mentioned; "*He was to be despised and rejected of men; he was to bear our griefs, and carry our infirmities; he was to be brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before the shearers is dumb, so he was not to open his mouth; and he was also to make his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death.*" And now the long expected Savior, "*the desire of all nations,*" appears. Prophecy is fulfilled, for his birth and parentage agree with the declarations made concerning him by the Prophets. Miracles also are performed by him, and in the very manner which had been foretold—"the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them." Every divine virtue appears also in his character, and divine truth drops from his lips. He now calls together his Apostles, to whom seventy Disciples are added. An infant Church is formed, the seed of that great Christian Church which was to follow. The proofs that Jesus Christ was sent down from God are encreased, and every day affords some fresh evidence in favor of Christianity. It is the cause of God and it prevails. "*The world,*" say the Pharisees, "*are gone after him.*"

"Hosannah to the Son of David, Hosannah in the highest." And now the twelve are sent forth expressly to preach the gospel, and to declare the coming of Christ.

But where is Paul the Apostle? Is not he also among the twelve? No, it is remarkable, that in reading through the four Evangelists, we do not so much as find any mention of his name. Surely, then, he must have been ignorant that Jesus was born, and that the promised Savior was come. He must have dwelt in some distant corner of the land, in some village, to which the fame of Christ had happened not yet to reach.—No, he was of Tarsus, a neighbouring city of Galicia, and he dwelt even in Jerusalem. But surely, then, Paul must have been some Heathen, who was unacquainted with the Old Testament Prophecies, some creature of Cæsar, engaged in mere affairs of state, who could know nothing of the Jewish Messiah. No, he was a Jew, and even one of the Pharisees, who were the strictest sect of the Jews; he was *"bred also at the feet of Gamaliel."*—Perhaps, then, he was examining the Old Testament evidence, or he was observing the character and the actions of the Messiah, that he might know whether this was truly the Son of God.—But at length Christ is crucified, and now many additional Prophecies are fulfilled, for it was written, *"That Christ should suffer."* *"The soldiers also part his garments among them, and for his vesture they cast lots."* He rises also from the grave, that the Scriptures might be fulfilled—*"He breaks the bonds of death asunder, because it was not possible for him to be holden of them."* And now also we read that he shews himself to a variety of persons; at one time, *"to Cephas, then to the twelve;"* and then his Re-

urrection is made manifest, for he appears "*to five hundred brethren at once.*" Does Paul come forward now, and own he is convinced? Oh, no; the Apostles go forth, Paul alone excepted, and the Disciples "*go forth,*" on every side, and "*with great power give they witness of the Resurrection of Christ from the dead.*" Behold the Savior, having finished his work, ascending triumphantly into Heaven, while "*A cloud receives him out of their sight.*" After this event, surely, every one must believe. After this event, Peter, even Peter who had denied his Lord, waxes bold in the very presence of his murderers; unbelieving Thomas having long before been constrained to cry out, "*My Lord and my God.*" - Now too the flock of Christians begins to gather itself together, and at length "*The day of Pentecost is fully come;*" "*Three thousand are added to the Church on one day of such as shall be saved.*" The Gift of Tongues is bestowed, and the Apostles, "*having tarried at Jerusalem for the promise of the spirit, go forth on every side, having received power from on high, the Lord also confirming the word with signs following.*"

But where, I say again, is Paul of Tarsus? Is he not now joined to the Apostles? Is he not now a convert to the cause of Christ?—No; it is remarkable, on the contrary, that the first time when we read of him is on the event of Stephen's being stoned to death, for it is said of Paul on that occasion, that "*he kept the raiment of them that slew him.*" Are you not now astonished at this wicked Paul, at this Jew, this Pharisee, this Hebrew of the Hebrews, this Doctor and Teacher in Israel, that he should be seen holding the clothes of those who were stoning Stephen, for Stephen was a Preacher

of Christ, a Preacher of Paul's own Messiah.—But let us next observe Paul beginning to “*breathe out slaughter against the Christians, and applying to the Chief Priests for authority to bind the Christians and put them to death.*” It usually happens, whenever the Gospel is made known, that a certain time is afforded for laying open the great evidences and doctrines of it, and if these are neglected, and the ordinary time is passed, I believe it often comes to pass, that great hardness of heart follows, and that the unbeliever then is not an unbeliever only, but perhaps also a hinderer of the Gospel, nay, a persecutor even, and injurious. Paul had now had the full opportunity of thus examining the truth of Christianity; he had been in the way of hearing much of Christ, and he might, if he pleased, have satisfied himself of the reality of his Resurrection; nay, he had seen the Martyr Stephen die in this very faith, and had himself “*beheld his face shine like that of an angel;*” but Paul had smothered his convictions: pride and prejudice, and many angry passions, conceit of his own wisdom, trust in his own righteousness, and confidence in his own religious opinions, together with bigotry to his Sect; these causes, or causes like these, disguising themselves under the sacred name of Religion, hurried him even into the hottest persecutions, “*for he verily thought that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and he persecuted the Believers in Christ even unto death, binding and delivering into prison both men and women, punishing them also in every city, and giving his voice against them, and being exceedingly mad against them, he compelled them to blaspheme.*” And now what shall we say? Can your patience

any longer bear with this unworthy Jew? Are you not ready to grow mad yourselves at the madness of this horrible persecutor?—"But God's ways are not as our ways, neither are his thoughts as our thoughts." Paul is struck to the ground as he is going on one of these bloody errands to Damascus. But in what way is he struck? Is it then in vengeance? Is it with a thunderbolt so as never to rise again? Is he doomed never to lift up his eyes any more, except "*in hell, being in torments?*" No; the time which I am now to speak of is the time when, as he thankfully expresses it in one of his Epistles, he is permitted "*to see Jesus.*" "*Suddenly there appeared a light in the firmament above the brightness of the Sun, and a voice from heaven saying, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me! And he said, who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest. It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And he said, Lord what shall I do! And the voice said, arise, and stand upon thy feet, for I have appointed thee to be a chosen vessel to go unto the People and to the Gentiles, to whom I now send thee, to open their eyes, and to bring them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, and to give them an inheritance among them that are sanctified through faith that is in me.*"

We know from the Scriptures what were the consequences of this wonderful Conversion of St. Paul. He was numbered from this time among the Apostles of Christ, and though in one sense he considered himself as "*the least*" of them all, and as not even "*meet to be called an Apostle, because he had persecuted the Church of God;*" yet he tells us, nevertheless, that in point of apostolic rank and authority,

authority, he was *"not a whit behind the chiefest of them;"* and he also *"labored more abundantly than they all,"* every where suffering the most cruel persecution from his old friends the Jews, and every where *"preaching that faith which once he destroyed."*

And now, what are we to learn from this extraordinary story?—In the first place it appears to me, that we may gain from it a very strong argument in favour of the general truth of Christianity.

It is fair, I think, when any one quits his party, and goes over to the contrary side, to allow that he does it honestly, and on conviction, provided it is plain he has no reason to expect to gain any thing by the change. Now Paul had nothing to gain; on the contrary, he had much to lose by becoming a Christian; and it is therefore reasonable to suppose, that he was very sincere as to his conversion. In general, it must be a large bribe that must tempt a man to bear the reproach and mortification which follow him when he goes over from his party. But what was the bribe offered to Paul? What in the world could he gain by his conversion? Could he get by it either wealth or honor, or ease, or earthly satisfaction! No, he well knew that he was now likely rather to sacrifice his wealth and all his worldly honor, that he was now about to bid adieu to ease and every earthly comfort and enjoyment, he well knew that all his best and dearest friends were now about to turn against him, and that as he had once persecuted others, so now he was about to suffer the most bitter persecution in his turn. *"For this cause,"* says he, in one place, *"the Jews sought to stone me!"* and no wonder, for who is there whom in general people are more ready to stone

than a deserter from their own party. Were not all the other Apostles also at this time exposed to a variety of sufferings? Had not Christ himself been crucified? And had not Paul, therefore, every reason to expect the same "*great fight of afflictions*," whenever he should profess himself converted into an Apostle. Accordingly we find him afterwards giving the following description of himself:—"He was stoned, he was beaten with rods, twice he suffered shipwreck; he was persecuted from city to city—he was in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of his own countrymen, in perils by false brethren, in perils of the sea, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in weariness and painfulness, in watching often, in cold and nakedness. Such was his treatment now he was become a Christian; and let us just ask also how did he bear it? "*Being defamed, says he, we entreat; being persecuted, we suffer it.*" "*We are accounted the very filth of the earth, and the offscouring of all things to this day.*"—"But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I may finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God." When we consider further how every temper of Paul's mind was also changed, how the Lion was turned into a Lamb, and how he, who had been once a Persecutor, became "*gentle and affectionate among his people, even as a Nurse cherisheth her children*;" surely, it must be owned, that we have in Paul a striking evidence both of the truth and also of the excellency of Christianity.

But I think we may gain from the same story of St. Paul's Conversion, a considerable degree of in-

light into some of the christian doctrines, I mean for instance, that we may learn something of the sovereignty and power of God, and of his long forbearance and forgiveness, and of the exceeding riches of his grace in Jesus Christ. It is the opinion of some who have never attended to the peculiar doctrines of the Gospel, that every man is saved by the merit of his own works, and by using merely his own natural power and strength, and not by any act of pardon, or by any special help or grace of the Almighty. Now how remarkably does the story of Paul's Conversion fly in the face of every such supposition, for what had Paul done in order either to merit, or in any degree to procure that mercy which was shewn him? What had he done in order to induce God to stop him on his way to Damascus? The case is a very striking one in this view. Paul was breathing slaughter at the very time when the voice from Heaven spoke to him "*Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me!*" These words imply that he was at that moment persecuting Christ. God in this case very evidently exerted his own sovereign power, and bestowed freely on Paul the most unmerited grace, in agreement indeed with those other passages of Scripture. "*For I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion—So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.*" In like manner, God is said to have "*saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace.*" But we observed also, that the long forbearance and forgiveness of God are here remarkably manifest: Paul was intended to serve as an eminent and

most encouraging example to the Believers of all ages in this respect. "*For this cause,*" says he, "*I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all long-suffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.*" It was by this deep sense of his guilt, and by the remembrance of his own infinite obligations, that Paul was now qualified for his work. When he went about preaching to the Gentiles, if he had to encourage any poor despairing sinner among them to repent, "*Unto me,*" he could now say, "*who was once a Persecutor and injurious—Unto me, who am less than the least of all Saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*" "*For this is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*"

But there is also a bad use which may possibly be made of this story of Paul's Conversion. Weak men I believe have sometimes taken occasion from it to confirm themselves in their errors and wicked men in their sins. Some enthusiasts, for instance, have been disposed to fancy that they also may be converted like Paul by a voice from Heaven, or at least by some impression that would nearly amount to the same thing. To such persons I reply, what then, do you imagine the case of Paul to be quite a common one? Paul himself did not so consider it. He often stood astonished at the strangeness of it. I am as one, said he, "*born out of due time.*" He thus compares himself to a person whose birth had been quite out of the common course, and undoubtedly both in the lateness and in the manner of his Conversion, his case is a direct exception to

that of most Christians who were either to come after him or had gone before him. In fact, the Conversion of Paul was neither more nor less than a miracle, and we might as well expect all the other kind of miracles which were wrought on the bodies of men in the time of Christ to be repeated in our days; as expect to see miracles again wrought in order to the Conversion of men's souls.

But wicked men, I also remarked, may perhaps take occasion from this story to encourage themselves in their sins. "True, say they, we cannot convert ourselves; it belongs to God alone to convert us; and we will therefore sit still and wait, or in the other words, we will continue in sin (for waiting is sinning in the case of these people) until God shall stop us in our mad career, as he did Paul in his way to Damascus. Where, say they, is the use of diligence and labor, or of reading the Scriptures, or of any of the means of grace? God can save us without these. We live in hopes, that he will convert us some day or other as he did Paul, while we are not thinking of it; and though to be sure we remain in the mean time in our sins, and in the gross neglect of the proper means of our salvation, yet we plead the great Apostle Paul for our example." You plead the Apostle Paul's example, do you? or rather you plead the example of Paul *before* he was an Apostle, and when he was yet unconverted. Well, then, if you plead his example at all, you may as well plead it to the full extent to which this plea can be carried. Now Paul not only sinned in the common way, and neglected the proper means of his salvation as you do, but he did what was still worse; he was even "*a Blasphemer of Christ, and a Persecutor and injurious.*"

"Go then, I say, since you plead the example of Paul, and follow the example throughout. Go then, and blaspheme Christ as he did. Go, persecute the present followers of Jesus. Go and hunt them out as he did in every city, and bind them, both men and women, and then put them to death." Oh, no; you are afraid of venturing any such length in wickedness as this.—But remember, my deluded Reader, that your plea, if it will warrant you in any one trespass against God, will warrant you even in this. Remember, that whosoever at any time encourages himself even in the smallest sin, either of omission or commission, by unconverted Paul's example, may on the very same principle encourage himself even in the greatest. Be afraid, therefore, to tread on this dangerous ground. Let not such kind of arguments as I have supposed you to use, be endured even for a moment, but consider them as the most complete perversions of the Gospel, and as some of the worst temptations of the Devil.

This leads me to address to you another observation on the same subject. God was pleased to convert Paul, as I apprehend, not as your argument has supposed, *because* he was a sinner, but *although* he was a sinner. Paul's sin did not invite God's grace, it only did not hinder it: nay, if his sin, which was great already, had risen to be somewhat greater, we are not without reason for supposing that the same mercy would not have been extended to him. "*But I obtained mercy,*" says Paul, "*because I did it ignorantly and in unbelief.*" This observation of Paul seems to imply, that if the crimes he committed had also been committed knowingly and wilfully, such would then have been the aggrava-

tion of them, that possibly they would not have been pardoned.

And now, Reader, you may trace in this respect, perhaps, an important distinction between his case and your's. Paul sinned ignorantly, but you are for sinning wilfully, for so your very argument supposes. Paul *obtained mercy because he did it in mere ignorance and unbelief;* you, perhaps, may not obtain mercy, because as to the evil you do, you do it not ignorantly but with your eyes open; nay, let me add, that the very plea which you use of being encouraged in your sloth or sin, by the free grace and mercy of the Gospel, is itself the greatest aggravation of your guilt: the very excuse you use renders your case dreadful, and who knows, whether if the same excuse is persisted in, your case may not thereby be rendered desperate!

To sum up all in a few words, the fair account of the whole matter seems to be this. Paul was a great opposer of the Gospel, and therefore a great sinner. His ignorance and unbelief, which led him into this opposition, were undoubtedly criminal, for he might have known better if he would, nevertheless, they afforded some small palliation of his guilt. God, on the whole, for the sake of his own purposes, and not on account of any merit in Paul, for there is never any merit in man, was pleased to convert this Persecutor by the power of his grace, and to convert him even by a miracle, for God, as it evidently appears by the succeeding part of Paul's history, had great ends to fulfil by means of this extraordinary convert. One of these ends was, that a striking proof might thus be given of the truth of that new Religion which the world in general, and which the Jews especially, were so

ill prepared to believe; and another end was, in
 order that a clear manifestation might be made of
 the sovereignty and power of God, and of the ex-
 ceeding riches of his grace, which nothing perhaps
 would shew forth more effectually than the Con-
 version of this unworthy Jew into an Apostle.
 These, as has been already observed, seem to be
 some of the great points which the story of Paul's
 Conversion is calculated to prove. It is calculated
 to prove (let it be carefully remembered) that God
sometimes may, and that he *always can*, convert even
 the most notorious sinners, and even in the very
 midst of their wickedness, but not that he *always*,
 no, nor even that he *often* will; still less does it
 prove, that God will convert any one again by a
 miracle. God works ordinarily by means, and he
 himself has expressly appointed, in the case of
 Christianity, what shall be his means. These are
 the preaching of the Gospel, (for which end this
 very Paul was sent forth) the reading of the Scrip-
 tures, and the various other helps to salvation with
 which men, according to their several circum-
 stances, are favored. If we neglect these, I grant
 it is still not impossible (as Paul's story shews)
 that God may in some extraordinary way con-
 vert us; I insist, however, that it is highly im-
 probable that he will do so, and the more sin we
 commit, the less likely should we consider our
 Conversion to be, just as we see that in the case
 of Paul, the addition of the sin of wilfulness
 to his other crimes might have proved an aggra-
 vation that would have put him beyond the hope
 of mercy. We read of one dying thief who re-
 pent on the Cross, and was certainly saved; but
 the Scriptures name no other instance of any thing

like a real and availing death-bed repentance. We are thus taught, that no dying sinner should harden his heart through despair, and yet that no living sinner should presume on God's giving him grace to repent in his last hours. We read, in like manner, of only one Paul who was converted by means of a voice from Heaven, or while he was breathing slaughter against the Christians; but, on the other hand, when the Apostles and Disciples were regularly met together, and "*were all with one accord in one place,*" at the time of Pentecost, we are told that the Numbers converted even in one day were *three thousand*, for God was pleased to give his peculiar blessing on this first instance of the public Preaching of the Apostles by an extraordinary effusion of his holy Spirit.

Whenever we apply ourselves therefore to the story of Paul's Conversion, let us bring with us an honest mind. We may, if we please, *wrest this*, as well as other parts of Scripture, *to our own destruction*; but we may also draw from it, if we are so disposed, the strongest confirmation of our faith, and the greatest encouragement to repent of our sins, and to put confidence in our Savior's mercy.

THE END.

We
len
ng
nce
an-
ans
th-
he
ere
one
we
one
to
of
ra-

the
an
as
de-
are
ith,
our